The Grand High Witch of Dreams

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No witchcraft is more ancient, more beloved, more enthralling than "once upon a time in a land far, far away." This magic spell was undoubtedly uttered in hushed tones way back at the dawn of time, probably around a glowing fire that cast the shadows of legend on the walls of a dark cave. With the frugal brandishing of just a few words, we are carried across time and space to a reality in which anything can, and does, happen. "Once upon a time" is a movie caption that ensures us that no little piggies were hurt in the course of the filming. Its companion, "in a land far far away," is the warning on the cigarette pack of legend. Studies show that there, in that faraway land, live wily wolves and terrible giants, and eating apples can shorten your life expectancy. The stock opening phrase has a crucial function: to calm the nerves and create distance. It exists in one form or another in every language in which stories have been told around a fire from time immemorial. In some versions it suggests "maybe it happened and maybe it didn't" (Armenia), and in others it speaks of "many many many years ago when there was a king in Galway" (Ireland), or even "once there was, once there was not, in days gone by on a haystack" (Turkey).

The equivalent Hebrew phrase, "*hayo haya*," comes to us originally from the man who gave us the first description of—as well as the name for—electricity, in a perfect marriage between fantasy and science fiction: the prophet Ezekiel, son of Buzi the priest, who lived in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar. Once upon a time, God spoke to Ezekiel, not to tell him of the distant past but of the future to come, revealing a series of chilling visions filled with wondrous creatures intricately described; dry bones that sprout tendons and flesh; hailstones; and an apocalyptic war. Among the first to use the phrase in its modern sense was S. Y. Agnon, who in 1913 in "*Leilot*" (Nights), one of his earliest stories, which is suffused with the perfume of ancient fairy tales, wrote: "Once upon a time there was a king, and the king wished for a queen."

The Hebrew version is a reduplicated phrase, a pattern that exists

in the language to describe dramatic actions, and is sometimes intensified by the addition of the word "*pa'am*" (once), resulting in three—a magic number in so many legends—measures of safe distance from the here and now. The here and now are the natural enemies of legend and the epic fantasy that grew out of it, the sort that Tolkien and his heirs produced. Such stories invariably take place in the same primal timeless territory, and are characterized most distinctly by a plethora of phallic objects of the piercing variety. Even the portal fantasy,[1] the "there and back" literature in which childhood in our world is transposed into a fictional world, fiercely guards its borders, and like a conscientious air hostess points out the emergency exits in the event of a tornado in Kansas: the wardrobe on your left, the rabbit hole on your right (genital symbols, wouldn't you say?). It was only with the appearance of the genre known as "urban fantasy" that this natural order was irreparably overturned and the creatures of legends were allowed to invade our safe space: the "other" was afforded entry into the familiar world. Through this revolving door, fantasy took its first steps into the here and now, dragging behind it the darkness and terror that accompany any overturning of the natural order.

Between the glass panels of that revolving door swings Nurit Zarchi, one of the most talented witches Hebrew children's literature has ever known. She has written over a hundred books, most of them for children, her books have been translated to 10 languages, and she has won numerous prizes, including the Prime Minister's Prize and the Hans Christian Andersen Honor. Zarchi, who was born in Jerusalem in 1941 and grew up on Kibbutz[2] Geva, did not need to resort to the definition of urban fantasy in order to see the reflection of the "other" in our world. She was the "other," a woman who went beyond the boundaries of the collective reality into which she had been placed. An outsider. Her books are filled with characters who have something different about them, maybe even a hidden flaw, characters whose "otherness" enables them to see what no one else can see, the points of contact between our world and the world beyond. Their otherness challenges reality, makes a

1 "Portal Fantasy" is a term that was firstly used in Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 3.

2 An Israeli adaptation of the "commune"—a utopian collective settlement, usually agricultural. Until the 1990s those settlements employed an educational method called communal lodging, in which toddlers were removed from their parents and raised with others their age.

mockery of it, and sometimes even nullifies it. It is a weapon as well as a shield, allowing the characters to see the wondrous and the magical, but also throwing up a wall between them and what is normative and accepted. When her gifted witch Thanina[3] (meaning "she-alligator") wants to understand how other people behave, she goes out to "spy" on them in order to find out what makes them normal. Her familiar, Korkavan ("Bellybutton") the cat, suggests she go to the supermarket. "How come I didn't think of that? Eating what regular people eat means putting into yourself the ingredients of regularness," she says excitedly. But after an abortive attempt to carry out this plan, she realizes that first she has to put on "the uniform of the regulars" and only then can she "find the inside of the outside."

As a woman for whom the natural order was overturned at the age of five with the death of her father and her delivery into the strict hands of the kibbutz, Zarchi creates an alternative world in her books, populating them with creatures of imagination, myth, and legend who reside side by side in a communal, virtually egalitarian, space. She conjures up witches and their familiars, crocodiles and crows, bears and wolves. She invites in the unicorn and the white deer, the king and the mermaid, drawing them all into the here and now with enchanted cords. The strong sense of place she creates in her books plants the figments of imagination firmly in the Israeli earth, with all its flora and fauna, aromas, and landscapes. She surrounds them with pine needles, not with the forests of Europe or the gardens of the Hesperides. When, long before Harry Potter, one of her characters, Amalya Kotz (her last name meaning "thorn"),[4] is sent to the Adraba Magic School (a clever play on the traditional "abracadabra" and the Hebrew for "on the contrary"), it is situated not in an ancient castle, but somewhere on the road to Haifa: "a field, a few hills, a row of cypress trees." Within the school grounds are "date and other fruit-bearing palms, bougainvillea, thick bushes, old olive trees, vines, and figs." The heady combination the writer creates between the here and there defies containment by borderlines and definitions. It is a magic potion that is hers alone, brewed from a mixture of the familiar and the strange, and a single sip sends the reader into a dream world whose poetics are drawn from surrealism and poetry.

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3 Mi yatzil et Tanina? [*Who Will Save Thanina?*] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1986) [Hebrew].

4 Khoveshet keter ha-niyar [*The Bearer of the Paper Crown*] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1981) [Hebrew].

Zarchi seeks to bring into our world the "other side," in the most literal sense, and anchor it in the familiar. In one of her first books, *The Blue Stone in the Ring*,[5] an artful homage to the legends of King Solomon as told by Bialik, Israel's national poet, she describes the slide by which God's creatures reach the Earth, "and since the foot of the huge slide is in the main square in Petach Tikva, the citizens of that city are immortal. As for the citizens of other cities, I have to confess: although I have wanted to for a long time, I have not been to any of them yet." That smooth, almost offhanded, glide from the world in the heavens to reality on the ground is a hallmark of Zarchi's work. The "other side" is a frightening place, and the "other" itself is even more frightening. Through the doors between the two worlds, dark things can slither into our homes, and they are eager to do so whenever they get the chance. Since its beginnings, urban fantasy has maintained a close relationship with fear, taking inspiration from masters of horror fiction such as Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft. The reification and introduction into our personal space of chilling archetypes and other vile products of the collective subconscious result in a maze of psychological nightmares. These creatures become even more terrifying not when we get close to them, but when they get close to us, for we are not creeping in darkness toward the entrance to the monster's cave, full of peerless courage and armed with rusty swords. It is the monster who is creeping up to our doorstep at night, still full from the last heart it devoured and armed with sharp claws. In general, the magic depicted in urban fantasy is arbitrary, random, and cruel rather than ancient, mysterious, and imposing. It is meant to shatter our preconceptions of the nature of the creatures who populate the other world. They can no longer be divided into angels and demons, heroes and monsters, fairies and trolls. Instead, that world is home to lethal angels and funny demons, vilified heroes and acclaimed monsters, both fairies and trolls with fangs. Nothing is black and white any more; there are no more borders and no more defenses.

This world is second nature to Zarchi. She delineates borders for the sole purpose of crossing them, in her books black and white are confined to the illustrations alone, and the only means of defense she provides to her readers are pleasure and humor. She does not hesitate to deal with

5 Ha-even ha-chalaka ba-taba'at [*The Blue Stone in the Ring*] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1972) [Hebrew].

the less amiable creatures of the fantasy world, and indeed, she has a particular fondness for witches. Some of them, like Thanina, are young girls with green tongues, while others are old women with bony fingers, like Kvarnagasty (a name that can be translated as "JustBitHim"), the witch with the repulsive name who founded a flourishing witchery in Israel, and who took her crow with the cropped wing out to hunt new prey, "flying with her arms spread out and her mouth open wide, drinking in the night."[6]

But the more profound horror that rises out of the depths of Zarchi's talent derives from the very fact that she overturns the natural order and opens the doors, arousing ontological fear in each of her books by blurring the border between here and there and thus depriving us of the comforting shield of the magic spell "once upon a time." When the floor shakes and the roof flies away, no one is safe. In some cases, this fear is already ignited by the title of the book. Is there really no lion there?[7] Or maybe there is, and he is lying in wait for us in the shadows. In other cases it is generated by the gradual incursion of the other world into this one, as in the water that slowly fills the apartment of Mr. Whatwilltheysay after a mermaid named Sandgrain intrudes on the safe life he lives within the clamshell of his home.[8] A talented poet, Zarchi uses language as an agent of the chaos within which she moves with delightful agility. She makes words her own, employing them in a way that endows them with the magic power of literal meaning. When Transparentia becomes transparent as a result of her grief over the death of her beloved pet dog, the doctor tells her, "You must find the right size of things, the true proportions. If you measure and measure day and night and learn to grieve in the exact proportion suitable for one small dog, you will find the right size for yourself too and then you won't be transparent any more." And then he writes her a prescription for a large ruler.[9]

Another of her witches, Amory, also a student at the magic school, is asked by her teacher, "Do you remember that we learned what the world needs? Something liable, something flyable, something sellable,

6 Yoni ve-ha-sus [*Yoni and the Horse*] (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1975) [Hebrew].
7 Eyn sham arieh [*There is No Lion There*] (Tel Aviv: Davir, 1992) [Hebrew].
8 Ambatyam [*Bathnymph*] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2001) [Hebrew].
9 Yoni ve-ha-sus.

something buyable."[10] And thus, with the wave of a rhyme, capitalism becomes a magic spell.

In this fluid world, in which words are potent and thought has the power to change existence, a power which is not always controllable, many of Zarchi's characters struggle to draw a line in the quicksand of uncertain reality. These children do not open forbidden doors, and are wary of jumping into rabbit holes. They are hungry for order and logic in the strange reversed mirror world of adults. The Bambumblims, for instance, who go about disordering reality in an orderly and consistent fashion, have an unusual child. Surrounded by the liberating wonders of his parents' world, he turns his back on them and says angrily: "All these annoying things . . . flowers that talk and cakes that chatter. I don't ever get to hear a whole story in peace."[11] But Zarchi has a wealth of recipes for witches. To paraphrase Terry Pratchett, another master of unrestrained fantasy, Zarchi has both first sight and second thought. And so, alongside the children who attempt to discipline the untamed space, there are those who use the freedom for their own purposes. Some do so in order to survive in a brutal society of children, like Shira, who learns from her talking dogs how to get the better of her best friend when she starts pushing her around,[12] or Alma, who wants to bring her invisible pony to school despite the teacher's insistence that "anyone you can't see doesn't belong, and anyone who doesn't belong can't come in."[13]

Zarchi's protective and poetic humor runs like a comforting thread through all her books, even the most somber. Its power derives from the exact same sources that arouse anxiety: it relies on her emphatic, sophisticated, and indomitable language, and operates through the aid of the absurd in surrealism. Her worlds move in a constant exciting and amusing dance where nothing is predictable. Thanina can adopt a baby and call him by the playful name Gurgles,[14] Arbalon can send a fleet of paper boats into the air,[15] people can imagine that the pears Eviatar drew are flying saucers and call "the police, the navy, the coast

10 Amory asig atusa [*Amory Catches Up and Flies*] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1992) [Hebrew].
11 Gan ha-bambumbalim [*The Bambumblim's Garden*] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1978) [Hebrew].
12 Paz ve-ani [*Paz and Me*] (Kiryat Gat: Korim, 2007) [Hebrew].
13 Alma o ha-yom ha-shishi [*Alma or the Sixth Day*] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003) [Hebrew].
14 Mi yatzil et tanina.
15 Arbelon mi-beit havrosh [*Arbelon of the Cypress Tree House*] (Tel Aviv, Massada, 1986) [Hebrew].

guard,"[16] and Amalya's magic forest can break out in a dance: "Nuts and figs and apricots and crabapples—they all gave fruit; little brooks burst forth and showed their happy faces; wild rabbits danced a minuet to the music of the neem tree harmonicas; hedgehogs and other small animals stamped their feet."[17]

Amalya's dance springs from Edgar Allan Poe's famous "nevermore" in "The Raven," which in Zarchi's book becomes a magic charm that transports the young witch to the realm of dusk hiding in the kibbutz fields. The allusion to Poe illustrates another important feature of the landscape of Zarchi's borderless territory: the lofty peaks of cultural citations. She is not afraid to offer her readers allusions, intellectual references, or discussions of the manner, place, and nature of works of literature or poetry. She makes no assumptions or allowances. Her exuberant writing overflows with associations, containing within it cultural codes asking to be deciphered, hidden challenges presented in her own special gift wrapping. She is not deterred even for a moment by the warning signs proclaiming "for ages 3-4" or the shelves labeled "children and young readers," nor does she make herself smaller or bigger in order to pass through doors of different sizes. Rather, she storms through them with writing that soars to the skies. It is ageless, timeless, evermore, because Zarchi does not write for children or for adults. She writes for dreamers, whatever their age.

16 Shlosha agasim ve-chad-keren [*Three Pears and a Unicorn*] (Tel Aviv: Graff, 2008) [Hebrew].

17 Khoveshet keter ha-niyar.